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Effective Dialogue in Outdoor Work

'LET THE MOUNTAIN SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES' – SO THE SAYING GOES

by Richard Lemmey

There is that special 'something' that happens when people and mountains meet. It is that 'something' that separates our work from being interactions between people alone and it is that which we value.

However the work we do isn't always carried on in silence and the saying itself confirms speaking and listening as being important in some way. How we speak and talk to colleagues and clients is obviously crucial, whether it's formal instruction in safety procedures, the open discussion in decision-making or just the bonhomie of the other campfire. (Jones' saying was a cry of exasperation at too much talking, it has to be said.)

There are many models that have been derived to help our understanding of interactions. We might be consciously competent (Noel Burch 1979), democratic (Tannenbaum and Schmidt, 1958; Gastil, 1994), in an

adult ego-state (Berne, 1964) and in a coaching mode (Hersey & Blanchard, 1972). These certainly have a place in supporting our observation and explanation of behaviour, but they are none the less hypothetical models that are ascribed to observations. There is also a tendency to take these models, or worse still one model, as orthodoxy and lever our interpretations of events to fix the models and not the other way round, not only giving spurious interpretations but also as was never intended by their authors. The strength of feeling of their disciples does rather support this view, whilst the models were not themselves based on reliable data but were sometimes derived from interpretations of small numbers of people who were in some cases in psychotherapeutic settings.

None the less, these models do provide excellent generalised frameworks for the critical analysis of interactions and conversations between people - none of whom are average! These

models also provide very useful shared vocabularies for discussion and contexts for writing and research. Publications in these areas are always lively and thought-provoking, but as a close colleague said to me early in my career - 'don't generalise about individuals'.

A more scientific approach to verbal behaviour can provide the context for discussion and give a more evidence-based analysis, which in turn can increase awareness of what is going on in a conversation. These observable characteristics can then be used later in more subjective interpretations but in themselves are not interpretations and maintain the primacy of the observation rather than an ascription. The categories within this analysis are themselves subjectively chosen and so the method is to some extent a model of behaviour but the process of categorisation has a good face value, as well as track record, and it is easy to see how similar methods

| SPEAKER | WHAT THEY SAY | CATEGORY |
|---------|---|-----------------------|
| Anna | <i>I think this group is ready for a self-reliant trip, but not too far from the centre, perhaps over Brantrigg.</i> | Content proposal |
| Mike | <i>Let's just think about this a bit.</i> | Process proposal |
| Anna | <i>They are ready to do all the planning themselves, let's ask them to take on all the planning for something like Brantrigg.</i> | Building |
| Tina | <i>It's a great idea.</i> | Supporting |
| Anna | <i>Does everyone understand how this group works and what is being proposed here?</i> | Testing understanding |
| Mike | <i>They could manage an overnighter in the Lakes.</i> | Summarising |
| Mike | <i>How high is Brantrigg?</i> | Seeking information |
| Dave | <i>Brantrigg is only just over 500m high.</i> | Giving information |
| Anna | <i>What do you think of it as an idea, Tina?</i> | Seeking opinions |
| Tina | <i>I think it would be a challenge and a good use of the time.</i> | Giving opinions |
| Mike | <i>What do we feel about taking the responsibility,?</i> | Seeking feelings |
| Anna | <i>I have a good feeling about this, given the weather.</i> | Giving feelings |
| Anna | <i>Megan, you haven't said anything, what do you think?</i> | Bringing in |
| Dave | <i>I don't think it matters what Megan thinks, she's just a trainee.</i> | Shutting out |
| Anna | <i>Can I just ask a question about group size?</i> | Behaviour labelling |

might work just as easily. This approach is not offered as a self-help recipe for conversation but more as a consciousness-raising exercise from which you make your own interpretations. It is just a small facet of dialogue which can help us work from our ethical and values positions.

By classifying people's utterances we can monitor conversations to see the pre-dominance or shortage of particular types of speech. This process has shown that certain classes of utterance tend to be associated with certain outcomes of group behaviour, for example collaboration or innovation, and the process is known universally as Behavioural Analysis. Knowledge of these associations between utterances and behaviours can help us develop as skilled conversationalists, both as speakers but more importantly as listeners. This does not imply a betrayal of our values nor a contrived, manipulative and unnatural way of speaking, rather that our conversations should necessarily be open, free, fair, inclusive, committed and productive, in other words Dialogue. These characteristics of dialogue might have implications for our roles as instructors, educators, or managers and for our concepts of leadership.

Outlined below left is an imaginary conversation between a group of instructors which illustrates the categories used in the analysis.

In this exchange Anna uses the categories strongly associated with leadership whilst Mike acts as a chair.

Anna proposes the substance of the exchange, builds it up, tests the shared understanding and opinions and ensures that everyone is included and thus demonstrates leadership. She is helpful, clarifying and purpose-forming. Mike, on the other hand, is more focused on the process of the exchange by making sure that it is thought through, summarising what people have said to ensure shared understanding, making sure that the discussion is informed and feelings acknowledged.

As for Dave. Poor Dave!

Different people use these verbal behaviours with different frequencies and it can be seen how certain combinations of category will have different outcomes. Exchanges between groups in different settings can be analysed to show the frequencies of the categories they are using and thus provide insight into how effective their dialogue and decision-making really is.

As individuals we can use these categories reflexively.

Where is the balance between my interest in what is discussed and how we discuss it?

Do I tend to actively seek or actively give information, opinions and feelings?

Does my behaviour tend to include or exclude others?

Do I look to support others or gain support from them?

Is it in my nature to be supportive or critical, accepting or questioning?

Which of the categories do I need to work on?

By being aware of our behaviours we could then consciously adopt strategies to improve them and become skilled conversationalists. If we were to do this too consciously, like concentrating on walking, we would become stilted and un-natural so to develop the awareness try observing a team-meeting, for example, for signs of the frequencies. Use one category at a time. Try spotting 'content/process' statements and 'seeking/giving' statements. You could then try opinion/information/feeling statements. After a while you may begin to notice that certain people favour certain categories. You may also notice that certain combinations have particular characteristics. For example a supportive, opinion and feeling seeker may help the group cohere well but not actually progress the task. So if the group is fragmenting such skills are needed but if time is short they are not.

Having these observations then puts you in a position to interpret. If you like, any of the previously mentioned models could be applicable or you could make your own personal

interpretations. Perhaps I would be a better leader if I tested other people's understanding and included people more. Could I be a better chair if I summarised more? (Or 'Blimey! I am like Dave!')

All this is intended to make us more skilled conversationalists and improve the effectiveness of our dialogue. This in turn can lead us to be more aware that leadership is more to do with 'power with' rather than 'power over' people. All of our organisations are constructing their own unfolding stories and leaders have to negotiate their way through these stories; and doing that requires dialogue. Leadership then ceases to be the strong, potent, hierarchical, depended-on model of 'Liberty on the Ramparts' that many still think it is, and becomes a more socially just and inclusive affair. Furthermore we then realise that leadership is less a characteristic of an individual but more a social phenomenon that tends to happen in the right conditions when the right people are present. The fact that superimposed hierarchical leadership is rarely sustainable is only too obvious from current events.

'Letting the mountains speak for themselves' is the counter to this analysis and has much to recommend it, as does silence. But even when alone in the outdoors we do sometimes have internal dialogues responding to our perceptions of power, threat, wonder, awe and opportunity and these are worthy of exploring another time. But I would suggest that the mountains are the mountains and we should not be anthropomorphic about them just to fit our chosen model of current orthodoxy, but that when we do talk to each other we should use a skilled, socially just, inclusive form of dialogue. ■

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Author's Notes

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